

## TM as a “father in full”: Educating for “the full scope of life”

### What More did as a father

1. Thought through his educational objectives and helped each child with the time, care, and conversation needed in a **patient** and kind, even pleasant and winning and disturbingly **joyful**, manner. As we will see, More concludes his life presenting patience as “the lofty peak of heroic virtue,” proved by joy.
2. Created an exceptional family culture (See <http://thomasmorestudies.org/library.html#aboutart> )
  - He cultivated friendship with each child nourished by common endeavors: some were entertaining, some intellectual, others involved works of mercy (care for those in need) or acts of piety; prayer and Christian virtues were lived in and through all. TM showed great care and forethought for each member of his family and household, taking on the most common and difficult duties with a winning freedom of spirit. He collected for their home fun and fascinating objects & books to awaken wonder and intellectual & spiritual powers. He fostered love of reading and good discussion; he fostered dinner conversations that were educational, engaging, & pleasant; he invited interesting guests to share their wisdom and experience and to help children develop the virtues of hospitality.

### #1 objective: educating the soul of each child for “the full scope of life”

- diligence, patience, realistic expectations not fond fantasies (“right imagination and remembrance”), humility, & joy had special importance for TM. (On danger of negligence: *Sadness* 18-23, 34, 55, 73.)

Why the *full* scope of life? **Self-rule can be achieved only with well-trained reason** “working through grace with ... diligence” (*D of Comfort* 203; *Sadness* 93-4). **Grace builds on nature.**

The reality is that faith never goes without [reason]. ...[I]f reason is allowed to run wild and grow overly arrogant and proud, she will not fail to fall into rebellion against her master’s faith. But on the other hand, if she is well brought up and well guided and kept in good temper, she will never disobey faith, **being in her right mind**. And therefore let reason be well guided, for surely faith never goes without her. (*Thomas More Source Book* 278; also *Sadness* 93-94 & *D of Comfort* throughout)

### Major Sources of More’s Family Life (Summarized in *Portrait of Courage*, chapters 4, 10, 14, 20-22)

1. Erasmus’ letters of 1519, 1532, 1535

1532 letter to Faber about More: “The children he has, he begot by his former wife, whom he lost while still a young girl with several children. But although his wife is sterile and advanced in age, he loves and cherishes her just as if she were a girl fifteen years old. Hardly anyone else now living loves his children more, nor does he see any difference between a matron and a girl: but **such is the kindness of his disposition, or rather, to say it better, such is his piety and wisdom, that whatever comes his way that cannot be corrected, he comes to love just as wholeheartedly as if nothing better could have happened to him.**\* You could say that his home is another Platonic Academy. But I dishonor his home when I liken it to Plato’s Academy where they discussed numbers and geometric figures and on occasion moral virtues; this home of More’s you could more rightly call a school and gymnasium of the Christian religion. There is no man or woman there who does not have leisure to study the liberal arts and worthwhile reading, although the chief and primary concern is for piety. No quarrel or nagging word is to be heard there, no lazy person to be seen. But such a good family culture is not secured through scolding or arrogance, but with courtesy and benevolence. All are busy about their duty, but there is liveliness there and no lack of self-possessed merriment.”

\*Confirmed by More’s insistence on “**making a virtue of necessity**” (*D of Comfort* 38, 199, 225; 95, 247, 254), that every tribulation is medicinal or better than medicinal (36), that God knows what is best (34-5, 192, 247; 242: *omnia in bonum* [all to the good for those who love God, Rm 8:28], that God never tries us beyond what we can bear (241, 242, 269; *Sadness* 11), that human virtue and effort are not enough; prayer and grace are essential. Also confirmed by Letter to Alice and *D on Conscience*: “Nothing can come but what God wills” (*TMSB* 180ff, 316ff, 335).

2. 1518 Letter to Gonell, his children’s tutor (*TMSB* 197-200)

-“**virtue in the first place**, learning in the second” yet “scholar” is title he likes best for them. Why?  
- “Wisdom... depends on **right conscience**, not on the talk of men.... A mind must be uneasy which ever wavers between joy and sadness because of other men’s opinions.”

- “[I]n their studies ... esteem most whatever may teach them **piety** towards God, **charity** to all, and modesty and Christian **humility** in themselves.”

- “[T]he **whole fruit** of their endeavors should consist in the **testimony of God and a good conscience**. Thus they will be **inwardly calm and at peace** and neither stirred by praise of flatterers nor stung by the follies of unlearned mockers of learning.” **Help “them love good advice.”**

3. *Life* by Roper, 1556, who lived with TM 16 years; married M’s eldest daughter, Meg (in *TMSB*)
  - 20: “in **virtue** and learning” More “brought up [his children] from their youth”
  - 29: TM worked to “**provoke**” his “children to **desire heavenly things**”
  - 30: “persuade[d] them to take troubles **patiently**” and taught “them to withstand...temptations valiantly”: can’t get to heaven in featherbeds; treat devil like the family monkey – the devil can’t stand to be mocked. (See *Sadness* 103, 73, 100: **patience as “lofty peak of heroic virtue.”**)
4. *Life* by Stapleton, 1588 ([http://thomasmorestudies.org/docs/Stapletons\\_Life\\_of\\_TM.pdf](http://thomasmorestudies.org/docs/Stapletons_Life_of_TM.pdf)): had access to all the family letters and to those closest to More; most of the family letters we have, are from here.
  - 96: TM led family prayers at night when he was home.
  - 96: Adopted daughter Margaret Giggs deliberately would do things wrong because she so enjoyed More’s “sweet and loving reproach.” Dinner conversations were intimate, friendly, and amusing. 100: More wrote, “**Rather than** allow my children to be **idle and slothful**, I would make a sacrifice of wealth and bid adieu to other cares and business.” (See also *Sadness* 35, 104.)
  - 132: More’s seriousness was always tempered with kindness and humor; with great cleverness More used laughter against pretentious vanity. He also used humor to soften blows (139). When, for example, he was Lord Chancellor, it was the custom that after Church, one of his servants would go to the pew of his wife Lady Alice, bow, and say “My Lord is gone”; after More resigned, he went himself to Lady Alice’s pew: bowed, and said “My Lord Chancellor is gone”; Stapleton reported that More did this “to soften the blow and show how little he made of his high honor.”
  - 139: **His children could not tell if he spoke seriously or in jest!** (*Sadness* on irony: 51-53)
  - 159: More **played a “strange trick” on the family** after he resigned and months before he was arrested: he hired one of the king’s officers to come during the family dinner and pretend to arrest him. Those who wept and lamented, More afterwards corrected; those who showed brave resignation, he commended.
5. Letter co-authored by Meg and her father: *Dialogue of Conscience* (*TMSB* 316ff) – how to engage difficult issues of conscience in a kind and humorous and effective manner (e.g., More begins, smiling: “Mistress Eve, have you come to tempt your father?”)
6. *Sadness of Christ*, TM’s last book, a short, powerfully concentrated account of “commander” Christ’s “battle plan” (17) for self-mastery, using powerful examples & images.
7. *Dialogue of Comfort* (Scepter Press): **Drama of the Heart; Drama of Free Will**
  - Work of a father, grandfather, friend, poet, historian, philosopher, orator, art patron, statesman, age 56
  - How to help free human beings to know themselves and then to rule their emotions and imaginations to live by right conscience? – to use freedom for self-government not self-destruction or slavery or suicide.
  - Setting**: a thin disguise for England under H8: Hungary under attack of cruel tyranny.
  - 2 characters**: old **Anthony** on his deathbed, who had been through two imprisonments by the same cruel enemy (17), and young **Vincent**, a wealthy leader concerned for his family, friends, and country. They are close relatives and share the faith and common values (a thin veil for TM’s children and friends) – although Vincent, we find out through old Anthony masterful conversation, doesn’t know himself well and he hasn’t thought through important elements of faith and reality.
  - Plot**: Old Anthony plays Socrates to young Vincent – and helps him in the end live up to his name: “one who conquers” (*vincet*). Vincent begins obsessed and virtually paralyzed by fear, but ends after 3 long conversations at 3 sittings having conquered those fears and being equipped to face whatever comes.
  - Audience**: Vincent is a thin disguise for his own children, esp. Margaret, and for close friends who refused to join More’s opposition to Henry. Vincent also represents a side of Thomas More himself, the side he energetically fights, just as old Anthony represents the ideal Thomas More worked and prayed to embody.
  - Light touch** throughout (has more merry tales than anything else More wrote), even the title: written “by a Hungarian in Latin, and translated out of Latin into French, and out of French into English”!

### Striking Features, *Dialogue of Comfort*

1. **Length** (300+ pages, the length of Plato's *Republic*) and **depth**: A masterpiece of psychological wisdom, of theological accuracy, and poetic ingenuity and skill – all presented in the voice and character of “a natural father” (18) who knows how to strengthen a weak, frightened, confused youth. Although this book seems homey, a bit rambling, and remarkably simple, it is so artful that it brings not only philosophy but also theology down from the heavens, to show **how self-mastery is achieved by anyone of goodwill**.

2. Begins and ends with need for right desire (18, 91; 292-306); tribulation shows what we *really* desire.

One theological term that More uses with remarkable accuracy and insight: the will (also called “heart” or “mind” in different contexts). At various points, old Anthony indicates that the only obstacle to seeing and doing God's will is our own unruly will. Will is our “rational desire”; Aquinas devotes many questions to clarifying this concept – and More devotes many images and differing explanations to do the same. Because we are genuinely free, we need reasons to inform and command the will: we do not simply respond to our desires, bodily or intellectual, as animals do; we decide, we choose, we *will*.

**Thomas More saw the education of the soul as his most important project as a father** – as would as any genuinely free person or great educator: to foster good loves and to teach the young how to govern and moderate their passions, to allow clear thinking and right action. This project of strengthening and freeing the will requires

- acquiring the necessary knowledge for free action – including self-knowledge
- actively fostering right desire: love for spiritual goods over passing earthly goods
- “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (234, 236).
- cultivating the virtues, human and supernatural, needed for free action.

3. Knowledge, esp. self-knowledge (195, 223, 233, 241, 264), is needed but is not enough (*D of Comfort* is a *Consolation of Theology*, not Socratic or Stoic self-mastery)

-Self-knowledge is, however, the beginning of wisdom: What passions rule? What images dominate? In a moment of fear or crisis, what comes to mind? what do we “remember”?

-We have to cultivate ideas and images of our choice so they become like trees with deep roots.

-Reason can and must tell the will what to do, but whether the will listens depends on its being disposed beforehand to do so. The will can drop the reins of reason & let whatever passion rule that is strongest in a particular temperament. (See *Sadness* 47.)

-**Need grace** and deep convictions cultivated “little by little from their earliest years” (197); it's God's law that **we'll always have to struggle** (33), but “virtuous diligence,” active meditation,” and grace builds “a sure, habitual condition of spiritual, faithful strength” (197). Being so “well armed ... ahead of time” (201) and “working through grace, with diligent effort on our part, reason will engender and set sure in us not a sudden, slight disposition of enduring for God, but by long continuance, a strong deep-rooted habit” (203).

-Sow word of God, dig up weeds, allow sunshine of grace for growth & deep-roots (235, 271, 272).

4. Need calm, patient soul for reason to function (126: “conscience established in good quiet & rest”)

- **importance of creating conditions needed to be free; how to be free**

- Irritability, impatience, murmuring = 1<sup>st</sup> step to betrayal, blasphemy (25, 27-8, 82-3, 95, 109, 116)

-dangers include “distraction from due deliberation” (134) and fear of pride (161-62)

-need well-built foundation in place beforehand (25): able to thank God & be glad, not just conform

-well-formed conscience is prudence in action: i.e., right reason fully engaged, not “framed” according to one's own desire (117-126), not a conscience “taking counsel of desire” (*CW* 2, 61/28)

-must see things in perspective (e.g., 171-85 [fear of riches], 207, 209-10, 220, 225 [V. plays role])

5. Stages of development in *D of Comfort* – necessity of “timing” and careful conversational “work”

-25-27, 83, 84, 117, 197, 200, 203, 277, 291: must first set as a sure foundation a full, steadfast faith

- depends on affections fixed and rooted beforehand (25-6)

-48: delays V's primary concern until 198 in general and until 244 in specific

-233: the first real prayer by Vincent, although need for prayer recognized on pp. 27, 85, 93.

-237: Vincent *says* he has “sufficient comfort”

-244: only now does Anthony judge that he can consider with Vincent the worst imagined

-245: the cause of failure now would be our own wrong imagining; failure to set mind securely on God

-254, 246-7: **fullest liberty = wisdom and grace to quiet our mind and to be content**

- 271: terror makes us oblivious of true “comfort,” i.e., spiritual strength of “right remembrance”
- 281: still “the real pinch is in the pain”
  - importance of giving perspective, being voice of reason:
    - 288: violent v. natural death. 290-91: v. Hell!
- 292-3, 300-301: end = savoring the ravishing joys of heaven

6. Sudden storms in the soul should be no surprise: e.g. St. Peter & Christ himself, 239-40 (also *Sadness* 7, 38, 40).

- Law of God: never rid of these (33, 272, 287)
- Adversity is better than prosperity** (51, 54, 58, 65, 73, 76-8, 80, 82): thank God & be glad; don’t just conform. To repeat: Irritability, impatience, murmuring are the first steps to betrayal and blasphemy (#4 above). During imprisonment, TM commented that God treated him as a specially loved child (Roper 52): TM was able not only to prepare himself for a good death, but to write the two masterpieces we look at now. Again: **patience = “lofty peak of heroic virtue”** (page 2 above).
- learn to sail through “storms of tribulation” (including temptations & passions, 19-20, 40-1, 66-7)
  - when tempests come, sailors must get themselves to their tackling** (66)

7. Other powerful metaphors artfully used

- 252-70: everyone is in prison & condemned to die; God is the kind & merciful jailor but just
- 272-3: bridling a headstrong horse (*Sadness* 35, 152)
- 283: old hart with antlers v. little barking bitch
- types of lovers: hot fleshly (299), noble Roman (300), God’s tender affection (110, 237, 299ff)
- of detachment: ...stone-still hedge 115, laughing land 206, snail 275-6, ...; *Sadness* 109-112.

8. -Good humor relaxes, helps create distance from fond fantasies; establishes friendly common ground

- Humor is the “sauce” (93) needed to make some foods appetizing and digestible; it helps us eventually “savor” spiritual pleasures; laughter humbly puts faults, fantasies in perspective. It also reflects the joy befitting a trusting and faithful lover of God.
- “Thou shalt no pleasure comparable find / To th’ inward gladness of a virtuous mind” (*CW* 1, 112).
- “If we will be good Christian men, we shall have great **cause gladly to be content...**in the patient and glad doing of our service...for God’s sake” (248).
- In prison: “the clearness of my conscience hath made my heart hop for joy” (Letter 210).

9. All depends on one’s trusting in the “tender loving mind” of God (304) and in God’s grace, not on one’s own “proud high mind” (302) given to irritability, impatience, and murmuring (25-27).

**Depends on right imagination & remembrance**

- Depends on using the means (esp. prayer, med) to remember & fight distractions (see *Sadness*)
- Why Christ comes: In our agonies, remember His (See *Sadness* esp. 45, 61)
- Artful use of images, memorable stories, “merry tales”
  - Images of God: fortress (109), body-shield (110-126, 302), mother hen (109-110)
- Psychology & epistemology: **the will needs strong reasons, well remembered, to desire rightly**

10. **Loyal friendship of loving & suffering Christ** should inspire similar action from us (237, 299-304).

- Shameful to forsake Him who so lovingly suffered for us (235, 237, 243, 248, 279-80, 284, 299)
- Foolish, crazy to exchange short pain for everlasting liberty and joy (70, 163, 168, 248, 276, 279, 281; *Sadness* 18, 108)

-Are the wills of my children equipped, cultivated, capable of commanding, ruling passions and piloting in the midst of storms and darkness?

-Will your children be equipped in mind and will – in “heart” – to embrace the pain that a virtuous life requires always and everywhere? (See *Comfort* 82 & Roper 29 for More’s formulation of this.)

Of course, the best equipped persons can use their freedom badly and betray themselves and those closest to them. It’s why TM spends 30 pages on suicide (127-157) as a metaphor for spiritual suicide.

-Being a father in full means you do your best to equip your children in full for the challenges they will face. How? Primarily by your own “right mind” of peace and joy that faithfully trusts in the “tender loving mind” of God and His grace.

From Court  
23 March c. 1521

Thomas More to His Whole School, Greeting.

5 See what a compendious salutation I have found, to save both time and paper, which would otherwise have been wasted in  
listing the names of each one of you in salutation, and my labor would have been to no purpose, since, though each of you is  
dear to me by some special title, of which I could have omitted none in an ingratiating salutation, **no one is dearer to me**  
**by any title than** each of you by that of **scholar**. **Your zeal for learning** binds me to you almost more closely than the  
ties of blood. I rejoice that Master Drew has returned safe, for I was anxious, as you know, about him. If I did not love you  
so much I should be really envious of your happiness in having so many and such excellent tutors. But I think you have no  
10 longer any need of Master Nicholas since you have learned whatever he had to teach you about astronomy. I hear you are so  
far advanced in that science that you can not only **point out the polar star** or the dog star, or any of the ordinary stars,  
but are able also – which requires the **skill of an absolute Astronomer** – among the special and principal heavenly  
bodies, **to distinguish the sun from the moon! Onward then** in that new and admirable science by which you ascend  
to the stars! But while you gaze on them assiduously, consider that this holy time of Lent warns you, and **that beautiful**  
15 **and holy poem of Boethius** keeps singing in your ears, **teaching you to raise your mind** also **to heaven**, lest the  
soul look downwards to the earth, after the manner of brutes, while the body is raised aloft.

Farewell, all my dearest,  
Thomas More

20 From Court  
3 September c. 1522

Thomas More to His Dearest Children and to Margaret Gyge, Whom He Numbers Among His Children, Greeting.

The Bristol merchant brought me your letters the day after he left you, with which I was extremely delighted. Nothing  
can come from **your workshop**, however rude and unfinished, that will not give me more pleasure than the most  
25 meticulous writing of anyone else. So much does my affection for you commend whatever you write to me. Indeed, without  
any recommendation, your letters are capable of pleasing by their **own merits**, the **charm** and pure Latinity of their **style**.  
There has not been one of your letters that did not please me extremely. But to confess ingenuously what I feel, **the letter**  
**from my son John pleased me the best**, both **because** it was **longer** than the others and because he seems to have  
given it a bit **more labor and study**. For he not only put out his matter prettily and composed in fairly polished language,  
30 but he **plays with me both pleasantly and cleverly, and turns my jokes on myself wittily** enough. And this he  
does not only merrily, but **with due moderation**, showing that he does not forget that he is joking with his father, whom  
he is **eager to delight** and yet is **cautious not to give offense**.

Now I **expect** from each of you a letter **almost every day**. I will not admit excuses (for John makes none) such as want  
of time, sudden departure of the letter carrier, or want of something to write about. No one hinders you from writing, but,  
35 on the contrary, all are urging you to it. And that you may not keep the letter carrier waiting, why not anticipate his coming,  
and have your letter written and sealed, ready two days before a carrier is available? How can a subject be wanting when you  
write to me, who am glad to hear of your studies or of your games, and whom you will please most if, when there is nothing  
to write about, you write just that at great length. Nothing can be easier for you, especially for girls, loquacious by nature  
and always doing it.

40 One thing, however, I admonish you, whether you write serious matters or the merest trifles, it is my wish that you  
**write everything diligently and thoughtfully**. It will do no harm if you first write the whole in English, for then you  
will have much less trouble and labor in turning it into Latin; not having to look for the matter, your mind will be intent only  
on the language. That, however, I leave to your own choice, whereas I strictly enjoin you that whatever you have composed  
you **carefully examine** before writing it out clean; and in this examination **first scrutinize** the whole sentence and **then**  
45 **every part** of it. Thus, if any solecisms have escaped you, you will easily detect them. **Correct these, write out the**  
**whole letter again**, and even then **do not grudge to examine it once more**, for sometimes, in rewriting, faults slip  
in again that one had expunged. By **this diligence** you will soon make your little trifles seem serious matters; for while  
there is nothing so **neat and witty** that will not be made insipid by silly and careless loquacity, so also there is nothing in  
itself so insipid that you cannot **season it with grace and wit** if you give **a little thought** to it.

50 Farewell, my dearest children,  
Thomas More





Thomas More, His Father and His Household, 1527, sketch by Hans Holbein the Younger, Kunstmuseum, Basel.  
 From left to right: Elizabeth (21), Margaret Giggs (22, adopted), Judge John More (76), Anne Cresacre (15, ward), Sir Thomas (50), John (18), Henry Pattenson (family "fool"), Cecily (20), Margaret (22), Lady Alice (57), family monkey!



The Family of Sir Thomas More, c. 1530, 1593, painting by Hans Holbein the Younger & Rowland Lockey. Hangs at Nostell Priory, The National Trust Photographic Library.